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A QUESTIONNAIRE ON MATERIALISMS

LEXICON, PHILOFICTION MARXISM, MATERIALISM, NON-LARUELLE

The current issue of October magazine contains several responses to a questionnaire on the nature of materialism today. My response is pasted below. Read the questionnaire prompt and download all responses [here](#).

Not too long ago, being a materialist meant something rather specific, despite the capacious complexity of the term; it meant one was a Marxist. These days materialism generally means non-Marxism, or some variant thereof. What happened?

As it was formulated in France in the eighteenth century and then more broadly across Europe in the nineteenth century, materialism was concerned chiefly with what Marx called the “sensuous activity” of society and politics, an undertaking guided by strict adherence to the modern if not nihilist mantras of secularity and critique. Today’s new materialism means something different. Methodologically speaking, the new materialism is dog-whistle politics for three things: empiricism, pragmatism, and realism.

Some components of the new recipe don’t immediately jibe. For instance, philosophical realism, the view that an objective reality exists independently of thought and culture, clashes with empiricism, at least superficially, given empiricism’s dependence on sense experience. Nevertheless a shared interest in material reality has combined these otherwise distinct traditions into a new amalgam.

The catalyzing agent can be traced to Gilles Deleuze, or more precisely to the form that Deleuzianism took in the English-speaking world during the late 1990s. Deleuze’s affection for empiricism is well known, excited as he was by the strict correspondence that David Hume forged between ideas and sense impressions, or, in another context, the attention that William James gave to what he called “pure experience.” Likewise James helped reorient Deleuze toward North American pragmatism, particularly its focus on process and material action unencumbered by abstract concept or cause. And contemporary thinkers like Manuel DeLanda have done much to recast Deleuze as a realist, describing life, the universe, and everything as an ever-widening series of machinic assemblages.

The empiricist-pragmatist-realist cocktail has intoxicated any number of fields beyond the parochial bounds of Deleuze studies. Chief among them is sociology, where the singular figure of Bruno Latour looms large. William James is a great influence here

too, as when, in a recent book, Latour implores his readers to fixate on the revelations of empirical experience.

Similarly, media studies decamped several years ago, this time to Berlin, in greater pursuit of a material semiotics of “hard” technology. Known as Media Archeology—or sometimes simply German Media Theory—this disciplinary transformation is closely aligned with Friedrich Kittler and the discourse he helped create, from Cornelia Vismann and Wolfgang Ernst to Bernhard Siegert and beyond. Repulsed by Cultural Studies and anything that smacked of postmodernism, Kittler fancied himself a champion of the “historical *a priori*,” to borrow Foucault’s evocative formulation, and oriented his studies toward a deeper kind of historical archive, while still leaving room for rapturous meditations on Aphrodite, Heidegger, and Pink Floyd.

What does materialism mean today? Doubtless it means what it always meant: an attention to things, processes, and physical life, over and above form, essence, or consciousness. Still, the tone has changed in subtle but profound ways. Materialism today elevates the importance of real objects, just as it highlights the connectivity between them; Tinkertoy ontologies predominate, with their struts and hubs interconnecting into larger frameworks. At the same time, a materialist today is more likely to value empirical studies over critical or conceptual ones, seeking ontological explanations where once sociopolitical explanations sufficed. (Consider climate change. Today’s materialist seeks explanations in carbon molecules and oil pipelines, not in, say, the intangibles of greed, desire, or power.) Meanwhile, materialism’s historical skepticism toward metaphysics and essentialism has evolved into a form of nihilistic anti-essentialism that even Marx or Deleuze would likely not recognize. Materialism today tends to privilege deterritorialization over all else—territorialization having become a cardinal sin—the resulting precarity then recast in a positive light as contingency, flexibility, fluidity, or something else beneficial. In fact, a materialist today is more likely to be enamored with the virtuosities of hyper-capitalism than repelled by them, dazzled by the complex beauty of derivatives and cryptocurrencies.

But not everyone is convinced. “The ontological turn,” wrote Jordana Rosenberg in a recent examination of such trends, “is a kind of theoretical primitivism that presents itself as a methodological avant-garde.” Alain Badiou is equally skeptical of what he calls “democratic materialism,” or the commonplace assumption that there exists nothing beyond things and the relations that connect them (remember those Tinkertoys). What’s lacking in such a model, for the author of *Being and Event*, are indeed events, those processes of wholesale transformation that depart from the stale configurations of things and their relations.

Offering a precise definition of materialism, or indeed of Marxism, has long been the subject of debate, as activists, artists, and theorists grapple with the vicissitudes of material existence. But McKenzie Wark recently suggested that Marxism in fact means something very simple. No over-arching philosophy, no articulable tenets, no oaths to be sworn—such materialism simply means *from the labor point of view*. One might quibble over the term labor, expanding it to include other kinds of activities, other modes of personhood, and indeed other kinds of nonhuman entities. But the basic idea holds firm. Materialism is the view from below. Materialism means being thrown unadorned into a world, but also remaining there, snared by its fetters. Such experience is shared by all those who are forced to gaze up at the abstractions of power, and yet remain unseduced by them. And thus materialism, while perhaps aided in certain ways by pragmatism or empiricism, must ultimately align itself with that point of view, whether one calls it labor, the people, “the 99%,” or some other name entirely.

A renaissance in such thinking, if and when it arrives, is welcome indeed. A renaissance in such fact? Surely the answer is self-evident. For these are already the basic facts of existence.

taken from here

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